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High-level dialogue

Committing to action on sustainable development in times of change

Note by the secretariat

I. Mandate

1. The rules of procedure of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) require basic documents to be prepared in relation to the agenda items, as appropriate. This document is being submitted to support the high-level dialogue under agenda item 2 of the High-level segment.

II. Embracing change

2. Since the creation of ECE, the region has gone through a number of fundamental transitions – from the post-war recovery in a divided Europe to the political and economic transitions of the 1990s to the new challenges of an increasingly globalized world. ECE has evolved in line with these developments and adapted to the changing needs of its member States. Despite past ideological divides, a pragmatic approach to international cooperation has yielded concrete results in ECE areas of work. Well-established mechanisms for consultation and dialogue have facilitated the flow of information and contributed to developing solutions to practical problems in areas of interest for all ECE member States.

3. ECE has supported the efforts of many of its member States in the transition to the market economy. As countries embarked on a significant overhaul of their institutional, legal and regulatory frameworks, ECE supported them through policy advice and capacity-building. The development and implementation of policies, standards, recommendations and conventions have contributed to increased cooperation and cohesion in the region.

4. Globalization has created new opportunities for economic interaction across borders. It has also raised competitive pressures and strengthened trends that may lead to new divisions and conflicts. ECE has increasingly adopted a more global perspective in its activities, taking into account developments outside the region and seeking to engage with a wider range of stakeholders.

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5. In recent years, the ECE region has again experienced significant change with both economic challenges and political tensions. At the same time, member States are now confronted with the need for another fundamental transition – the shift towards sustainable development. An ambitious, truly global and universal sustainable development agenda is taking shape and is expected to be agreed in 2015.

6. The set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will be at the core of this new agenda, will drive policy actions and inspire the creation of new partnerships to make change happen. A strong framework for monitoring and review of implementation will also be required to fulfil the promise of a future of shared prosperity and respect for the Earth's ecosystems. Business as usual is no longer an option, and governments, international organizations and other stakeholders will need to find new ways of working to promote policy coherence, pool efforts and facilitate collaboration among multiple actors.

7. ECE, with its diverse but closely interrelated subprogrammes of work, has the capacity to assist its member States with this transition. It can serve as a catalyst for action by countries, including in such key sectors as transport, trade, energy, environmental protection, housing and forestry. At the same time, further linkages should be developed between the different aspects of ECE work and cross-sectoral activities should be further strengthened, thus contributing to an integrated approach in the implementation of the new development framework.

III. The challenges ahead

8. The ECE region is very diverse, including high-income countries, middle-income energy exporting countries and landlocked low-income developing economies. Given this diversity, the importance of different policy issues varies across countries. However, many challenges are common throughout the region.

9. Inequality and social exclusion remain a problem, even in the more advanced countries, where national averages mask the plight of the most vulnerable groups. Economic development has been affected by recurrent economic and financial crisis, which have increased unemployment and undermined social cohesion. In the less developed countries, economic fragility and lack of diversification do not provide solid foundations for sustained expansion.

10. On gender equality and women's empowerment, severe problems remain throughout the region with respect to their labour market participation, women's representation in political and economic decision-making positions, and violence against women and girls.

11. The region has the world's largest environmental footprint. It needs to reduce greenhouse emissions, contain the loss of biodiversity and decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and resource use. The mismanagement of land and water resources, and excessive pollution have negatively affected economic opportunities and the health of population in many communities.

12. These challenges are not new. On the contrary, they reflect long-standing adverse trends that need to be addressed urgently, as the cost of inaction or inappropriate responses increases as time passes. Given the scale of the challenges, strong interventions will be required to address them in a comprehensive way.

13. In essence, what is needed is to reinvigorate and widely implement the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development is certainly not a new idea – it was endorsed by the world's governments at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro 'Earth Summit', and reaffirmed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 20 years later (Rio+20). It matches the complex challenges we are facing today and remains intensely

relevant. Despite some progress, policies and programmes are needed to integrate the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, so that the present generation can meet its needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. These three pillars cannot work if they are seen as competing agendas. The integration of social, economic and environmental considerations, linked with and complemented by human security, has still not fully taken place, conceptually and in the minds of people. We need a new push to move beyond the rhetoric of sustainability across all its dimensions.

IV. Adapting globally agreed goals to national realities

14. The emerging post-2015 development agenda with the set of Sustainable Development Goals at its core offers a unique opportunity to chart a new era of sustainable development. It will have an integrated, cross-sectoral approach, universal relevance and a transformative ambition, while being adaptable to the specific conditions of each country.

15. The universal character of the SDGs means that – different from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – all countries need to implement them, each with its own approach but sharing a sense of the global purpose. In his report 'The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet' the Secretary-General points to the importance of regional efforts in adapting globally agreed goals and policy priorities to specific national realities. Regional efforts can contribute to preserving some coherence in this process of nationalization.

16. MDGs were of limited relevance for ECE member States, as their primary focus was on the needs of the world's most disadvantaged. In most transition countries in the region, the relatively high human development levels that existed in much of the region meant that some of the MDGs, in their global form, had already been achieved in 1990, or could be easily achieved by 2015 via 'business as usual' developmental progress.

17. Some countries with economies in transition of Europe and Central Asia experienced significant difficulties in adapting MDGs to their own circumstances.[1] In a number of countries, nationalized MDG targets and indicators were produced following inclusive national consultations and codified via dedicated national legislation. In other countries, the redefined MDG targets and indicators were approved together with national development or poverty reduction strategies, but were not always renewed when the strategies came to an end. More importantly, national budgets did not always reflect these MDG priorities. Another important development was the localization of MDGs – adapting their targets and indicators to subnational regions, administrative jurisdictions or for specific vulnerable groups. This was a logical development since most of the disadvantaged were concentrated in special geographical regions or were part of specific ethnic groups.

18. Adaptation of MDGs at the national level often led to non-comparability. Countries redefined the goals in a manner that, although perhaps more relevant for domestic considerations, created variables that were not comparable across countries. This lack of international comparability made global monitoring more difficult. The experience gained in the process of nationalization of MDGs suggests that guidance on guidelines and

[1] Cf. the report entitled 'The Millennium Development Goals in Europe and Central Asia. Lessons on Monitoring and Implementation of the MDGs for the Post-2015 Development Agenda'. This report was prepared within the Regional Coordination Mechanism for Europe and Central Asia (RCM) and the Regional United Nations Development Group for Europe and Central Asia Team (R-UNDG) and is available on the ECE website at www.unece.org.

methodologies to reconcile nationalization with the need to maintain some ability to globally monitor progress would be useful.

19. ECE, in cooperation with the United Nations system in the region, can provide a regional platform for dialogue to facilitate this adaptation, so that SDGs can become an integral part of national and regional strategies and plans.

20. ECE, within its subprogrammes of work, can also contribute to the implementation of the global goals through further development of its legal instruments, norms, standards and regulations that fit the needs and circumstances of its member States. With its closely interrelated subprogrammes, ECE is a unique 'sustainable development organization' for the region that can address the multiple dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated manner.

21. Following the adoption of the post-2015 framework, ECE will systematically review its programme activities to make sure that they are fully aligned with the new goals and targets and with a view to further strengthening a cross-sectoral approach.

22. The integration of policy goals in different areas may require measures such as improved information sharing through intersectoral consultations and coordination, and the implementation of joint activities. Overall, the guidance of the Commission will be of particular importance to integrate the work carried out in the different subprogrammes in a coherent way that serves to promote sustainable development in the region.

V. Mobilizing partnerships

23. The path towards sustainable development involves a large-scale change with multiple ramifications. Such a significant transformation can be achieved only through the involvement of all stakeholders, which is driven by a shared vision working towards common goals. Inclusive partnerships must be a key feature of implementation at all levels: global, regional, national and local.

24. Governments will spearhead the transformation, providing leadership and guidance, creating an appropriate legal and regulatory environment and deploying multiple policy initiatives. Success, however, will depend critically on the public ability to form large coalitions of support including the private sector and civil society, inspiring and mobilizing key actors and aligning private actions and public policies.

25. In order to appropriately support its member States in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda, ECE will also need to strengthen and develop further its initiatives to build partnerships. In particular, this calls for further strengthening collaboration with other international organizations, including in the context of structured forms of inter-agency cooperation like the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM).

26. In the normative work of ECE, it is important to ensure that the insights and expertise of the private sector inform the discussions on standards and regulations, thus contributing to a correct diagnosis of needs and problems and leading to prompt actions to address them. However, it is also important that these discussions are not captured by interests with narrow sectorial concerns that do not take into account impacts on other areas. This suggests the need to create platforms for interaction with the private sector that reflect the diversity of sectoral interests in a balanced way and provide a level-playing field for the consideration of different views and the resolution of conflicts.[2]

[2] On public-private partnerships (PPPs), cf. section VI of document E/ECE/1474.

27. Partnerships should include not only business representatives but also seek the active involvement of civil society at large. This is important to identify existing problems, propose innovative ways to address them and assess the impact of any actions. In particular, monitoring mechanisms are going to play an important role in the post-2015 development agenda and the contribution of civil society will be critical in this area. The attraction of academic expertise would also contribute to the design of evidence-based policies and the appropriate assessment of alternative courses of actions.

28. Building effective partnerships requires clarity about the goals to be achieved. These may be diverse, ranging from the structured exchange of information to the commitment to implement well-defined projects. In any case, an appropriate balance of interests is necessary. An ECE dedicated partnership facility could systematically review opportunities, ensure that partnerships are appropriately structured, identify and exploit the potential for cross-sectoral partnerships and draw lessons in this area to be shared across the organization. It would also provide the necessary visibility to facilitate the efforts to engage new partners.

VI. Monitoring and accountability

29. The Secretary-General in his synthesis report emphasizes the need for an accountability framework for the new agenda that is based on a culture of shared responsibility, and built on national ownership, broad participation of stakeholders and full transparency. As one of the principal components of a multi-layered framework he suggests a regional component for peer reviewing, tailored to regional and subregional needs, and undertaken by existing mechanisms, like the ECE Environmental Performance Reviews and the peer reviews of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in a participatory, multi-stakeholder process.

30. At the Regional Ministerial Consultation on Monitoring and Accountability for the ECE region in September 2014, participants generally agreed that a comprehensive, multi-layered and multi-stakeholder accountability framework would be crucial for the success of the post-2015 development agenda. They also shared the view that national mechanisms should constitute the foundation of such a system, with national strategies for sustainable development as a key instrument to promote accountability at the national level.

31. At the same time, there was a strong degree of consensus on the importance of the regional level as a link between the national and global levels in a multi-layered framework. Functions at the regional level could be the exchange of experiences and good practices, and the facilitation of capacity-building. The regional level is also the natural platform to address pan-European or transboundary challenges such as water cooperation or the green economy.

32. Regions can play an important role in meeting the data and reporting requirements of the post-2015 development agenda. The region is the most appropriate level to provide support to countries, through capacity-building activities, and appropriate harmonization and validation initiatives. The work of ECE and its multilateral environmental agreements could offer opportunities to facilitate data collection and sharing in a cost effective way and in cooperation with other interested partners, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Environment Agency (EEA) and OECD.[3]

[3] On measuring and monitoring sustainable development and contributions of ECE, cf section V of E/ECE/1474.

33. Multiple monitoring and accountability mechanisms exist in the ECE region covering different sectors (e.g. environment, transport, statistics) that could be integrated into a post-2015 monitoring and accountability framework. Existing peer review mechanisms could be used, combined and adapted to identify regional trends, obstacles and best practices. A mapping exercise could be useful to produce an inventory of existing mechanisms for monitoring, review and accountability, so that these could be integrated and any remaining gaps addressed. This could be done in the framework of United Nations interagency coordination mechanisms like the RCM and the regional United Nations Development Group (UNDG).

34. At the global level, the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) will play a key role in following up on and reviewing the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda. Governments are expected to discuss modalities for the work of HLPF at its 2015 meeting. The General Assembly, in resolution A/C.2/69/L.64, invites the regional commissions to continue to contribute to the work of HLPF, including through annual regional meetings, with the involvement of other relevant regional entities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate.

35. National information, analyses and lessons learned could be collated, aggregated at the regional level and discussed at annual regional forums for sustainable development convened by ECE in cooperation with the United Nations system in the region and other stakeholders. Different options for the compilation, elaboration and presentation of such regional outcomes need to be explored so that they provide an effective input for the discussions at the global level.

VII. Some policy issues for discussion

36. In view of the above, the discussion under this item could consider the following questions:

(a) How can ECE best assist its member States with the implementation of the SDGs? What lessons can be learnt from the MDG process in the region?

(b) How can ECE strengthen its cooperation with the business sector, academia and with civil society? How can goal-oriented partnerships be developed that lead to action? How can a partnerships facility contribute to bringing coherence and visibility to the efforts to reach out to the private sector and civil society?

(c) How can existing mechanisms that could support the implementation of the SDG be effectively integrated and any remaining gaps addressed?

(d) How can regional lessons be shared at the global level? What are the options for the compilation, elaboration and presentation of regional outcomes as an input for the discussions at the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development?